

Ten foods that help reduce stress

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Yes, our prehistoric ancestors had to fend off saber-toothed cats and gigantic hyenas. But did they ever have to take an organic chemistry final or host the in-laws for the holidays? Now that's stress.

And what we eat can either help our bodies fight [stress](#) – or hurt the

effort, said Connie Diekman, director of university nutrition at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Some foods appear to soothe us; others fight the inflammation that comes with stress," Diekman said. "Stress eating, however, can be a problem this time of year. During stressful periods, there is the mental response of 'I need to do something.' And that 'something,' for some of us, is eating as much as we can as fast as can. We have learned. 'If I eat, I can avoid' or 'I can energize.' The problem is, of course, once people do it, they realize it didn't help."

Diekman encourages WUSTL students to eat a healthy meal every three to four hours to maintain healthy blood-sugar levels. She also reminds students to get their rest.

"Lack of sleep is a huge trigger for inflammation as well as overeating," Diekman said. "If you don't get a minimum of five hours a night, there is a higher probability you will overeat."

Here, Diekman offers 10 foods to help fight stress during the holidays.

1) Whole grains

Diekman said whole grains, such as oatmeal, whole-grain breakfast cereal and breads offer a range of stress-busting benefits.

"They help you feel full longer, require chewing, which releases anxiety, and keep [blood sugar level](#) longer," said Diekman. "Starting the day with oatmeal is one way to fuel the body, warm the core and provide nutrients that keep the body strong."

Whole grains also boast serotonin, which is known for its calming effect.

2) Hot tea

Studies show tea's plant compounds help us relax. But so does its warmth, Diekman said.

"When we drink something cold, it causes the body to raise its core temperature; the opposite happens when we drink something really hot. But warm drinks appear to be calming to the body," Diekman said.

3) Nuts

Nuts, especially walnuts, almonds and pistachios, contain healthful fats, which can help the body fight stress-induced inflammation.

Unfortunately, the unhealthy fats found in comfort foods such as french fries and bacon don't have the same benefits.

"A high-fat meal can put you to sleep," Diekman said.

4) Vitamin C-rich foods

Foods loaded with Vitamin C help fight inflammation and keep the immune system strong.

"Research shows foods with flavonoids help our bodies fight stress. What the research does not show, though, is that they prevent stress," Diekman said. "So it's important for people to realize this isn't about finding a capsule that has their flavonoids. It's about getting these whole foods that keep the immune system functioning on a normal keel. So grab some oranges, blueberries, strawberries or even some spinach."

5) Dark chocolate

Dark chocolate, the healthiest variety of chocolate, both increases serotonin and reduces cortisol, the inflammation-inducing hormone triggered by stress.

"Just remember to choose portions wisely," Diekman said.

6) Oily fish

Oily fish can block and, in some cases, counteract stress biomarkers, Diekman said.

"Oily fish like tuna, salmon and sardines are rich in [omega-3 fatty acids](#), which help fight inflammation, a common result of stress, and they have a good variety of vitamins that keep the body strong," said Diekman. "And [oily fish](#) also seems to enhance the brain's functioning power."

7) Warm milk

Like a cup of [hot tea](#), warm milk is soothing. Milk also boasts tryptophan, a key ingredient in making serotonin.

"The milk sugars, like all carbohydrates, act on serotonin in the brain," Diekman said. "Enjoy the milk with a graham cracker or another complex carbohydrate to get more glucose."

8) Vegetables

Diekman said stress-eaters should stock a fridge full of crunchy veggies. Just the act of chewing vegetables like carrots and celery may relieve tension.

"Raw vegetables generate lots of crunch, which is an aid to alleviating

anxiety and prevents jaw clenching," Diekman said.

9) Water

Think you can only get dehydrated in the summer? Think again.

"You may not be sweating in the winter, but you are still losing fluids from the surface of the skin. That's why your skin gets so dry," said Diekman. "Hydration is essential to fighting stress since fluids keep fuel circulating in the body and the right balance of the electrolytes helps muscles and nerves perform their best."

10) Avocados

Super-food avocados are loaded with potassium, which can lower blood pressure.

"They can help keep the balance in muscle activity and fluid balance," Diekman said. "In general, plant foods are just packed with compounds beyond the vitamins and minerals that play a huge role in the overall health of the body."

Nutritionist Connie Diekman's stress-busting menu ideas

Breakfast:

- Oatmeal, fruit and yogurt
- Egg whites and cheese on a bagel, piece of fresh fruit

Snack

- Cup of soup with a whole grain roll
- Cup of whole grain cereal tossed into low-fat yogurt
- Fresh veggies with hummus

Lunch

- Spinach salad topped with beans, raisins, sunflower seeds and tuna
- Whole wheat pasta tossed with broccoli, spinach, mushrooms, beans and marinara or pesto

Dinner

- Whole wheat tortilla topped with beans, veggies and some guacamole
- Brown rice, veggie and chicken stir-fry

Late night

- Cup of hot chocolate with a graham cracker or a crisp rice cereal bar
- Cup of steamed milk with some popcorn

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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